

The Price

Alexandra Sokoloff

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Extract

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THE PRICE

ALEXANDRA
SOKOLOFF



Prologue

Dead of winter, and snow falls like stars from a black dome of sky. All sound is swallowed by the swirling white chaos.

No human life out there on this night. The city of Boston sleeps in the storm . . .

But underneath the ice beats a great heart that is never still.

Beneath the falling snow, a vast complex sprawls like a frozen spider buried in the white drifts—the architectural wonder of Briarwood Medical Center: six state-of-the-art hospitals symbiotically entwined. Labyrinthine underground tunnels and high glass bridges above the snow-swept streets mate the white marble, Doric buildings of the old Massachusetts Bay Medical College, the dark brick buttresses of Mercy, the sleek curves of Briarwood Children’s Medical. Torturously twisting corridors wind through Gothic arches and classic Colonials and angular modern structures, creating a bewildering, futuristic maze.

Inside, the hospital has a peculiar vacuum quality of silence. In the fluorescent halls, medical personnel

walk in measured paces; dazed, dreamy patients in robes drift past the open doors of darkened rooms. Snow flies outside the windows, beating soundlessly against the glass.

Deep within the labyrinth, a man moves in the endless halls: tall and dark, a graceful shadow against the white of the walls.

He is at home here—his movements fluid and unhurried, his angular face thoughtful and intent.

The corridors twist and turn, drawing the man deeper into the hospital, past vast wards with the injured and terminally ill moored in their beds. There is a throbbing pulse around the man, the heartbeat of the hospital: life-support machines augmenting labored breathing, soft moans of pain, quiet sobbing ... and a whispering, barely audible at first, but increasing ...

The man cocks his head slightly, listening.

The sound builds around him ... the prayers of relatives keeping vigi ... pleas in all languages ... overlapping ... rising and falling in waves ... through anger, through tears:

Please, God ... please help her ... Don't let him die ... Dear Lord ... Signora, aiutami ... Hear me, Jesus ...

The dark man closes his eyes, listening to the music of the voices. Then his face sharpens, eyes opening and focusing to pinpoints, at the sound of one fierce, stark vow:

I would do anything.

Chapter 1

Deep in the heart of Briarwood Children's Medical—or perhaps it was Carver Women's, the boundaries between Briarwood's separate hospitals having so merged by now, it was at times impossible to tell the difference—stretched a long corridor rarely traveled in the winter months.

A glass wall ran along one whole side of the corridor, looking out on the hospital garden, in mid-March still an arctic wasteland, the shapes of statues and trees frozen and drifted in snow. On the other side of the hall, arched wooden doors led to the hospital chapel. The doors were not immediately apparent or even easy to access, but not a few people found themselves there almost by magic, in the course of desperate midnight wanderings through the hospital maze.

Inside, the chapel was small and dim, with four rows of wooden pews and a low platform serving as a dais, and cold—as if the oppressive overheating of the hospital had not been able to penetrate here. In a center pew, Will Sullivan sat alone in the enveloping silence. Handsome in the most well-bred of ways, a

classic, uniquely American combination of movie-star elegance and frontier ruggedness, he currently looked ten years older than his forty-two years. His six-foot-plus frame seemed as stooped as an old man's, his gray-blue eyes sunken, his face haggard with worry.

Will clasped his too-dry hands as if in prayer, tried to sit up straight, but it was a great effort; he felt scraped raw, nearly dead with exhaustion. In fact, for days, or weeks, or even months, he had not been entirely sure if he was awake or asleep.

Behind the podium at the front of the chapel, a tall stained-glass window portrayed a slightly cubistic Christ as the Shepherd, watching over lambs. Against another wall, a wooden wheel depicting symbols from the world religions was mounted above a bookshelf lined with religious texts in various languages. Votive candles in red glass flickered on a side altar.

Will gazed up through bleary eyes at the patterned glass before him. Black words were scattered almost randomly in the panels, like code, and for a moment Will lost himself, puzzling over the sentence.

**THE LORD
IS THE
STRENGTH OF MY
LIFE A VERY PRESENT
HELP IN TROUBLE
OF WHOM SHALL I
BE AFRAID
?**

Will stared harder, caught by the final phrase, the last words set apart from the others, black and grim.

BE AFRAID

He shivered in the unheated chapel.

A shadow moved to the side of him. Will twisted in his seat, startled.

A round-cheeked, salt-and-pepper-haired chaplain stood in a side doorway, looking at Will inquiringly.

“May I help you?”

Will briefly took in the chaplain’s ruddy, eager face, the wrinkled suit, the too-tight collar around the clergyman’s substantial neck. Without thinking, Will shook his head. “No. Thank you.”

The chaplain hesitated, but when Will turned back to face the dais, the clergyman disappeared back through the side door.

Will sat again in the silence and spoke aloud, surprising himself.

“God.”

He stopped, confused.

God who?

His tired mind paged through memories of Sunday services: sumptuous cathedrals with well-heeled parishioners; midnight Masses at lace-curtain Irish churches; wakes, baptisms, charity events . . . all such a pillar of his father’s political life.

There are no atheists in foxholes. Or on the campaign trail, either.

But faith? Actual faith?

Had he ever believed, Will’s father?

Had Will?

Had it ever even occurred to Will that he *didn’t* believe?

His mind reached for God and found—nothing. He

believed in goodness, and morality, and law, and love—oh yes, love at first sight, romantic love, love of state, of country, love of justice. But God? Only in the most abstract of ways, and perhaps not even that.

Yet he had unquestioningly continued the family tradition, the Sunday-service photo op. And dragged his wife and daughter into it, Joanna never protesting, everything always for him.

Had there ever been any God under the politics?

And now, when actual miracles were required . . .

He felt on the verge of drowning. And wouldn't it be a relief to give in, to let his mind go and slip into an ocean of oblivion, unconsciousness, insanity . . .

A sudden, live stirring inside his suit jacket roused him back to the present. A small, furry nose poked out of his lapel, followed by huge dark eyes, long white ears. A rabbit.

Will felt its tiny heart racing against his own. He stroked it absently, looked up at the stained glass again, and a jolt of adrenaline spiked through him, the awareness of why he was there returning. He swallowed through a dry mouth, tried once again to pray.

“I can't . . . I can't lose her.”

He could feel his heart beat, slow spasms in his chest. Only silence answered him.

After an endless, empty moment, Will rose with effort, turned away from Christ's frozen image in glass . . .

. . . and was startled to see he was not alone. Another man sat a few pews back, older than Will, yet somehow ageless, with deep-set eyes and dark hair. He must have been startlingly beautiful as a young man—a face Roman in its nobility, the chiseled-marble

features powerfully masculine, but with an almost feminine sensuality of mouth; blue-black hair glinting with silver, slate-gray eyes, long limbs, and tapered fingers—his Hermès suit, his bearing, all understated, faintly European elegance.

The man's gaze lowered to Will's chest, and he smiled slightly. Will remembered the rabbit, realized how strange a picture he must present. He tucked the bunny gently back into the carrying bag inside his lapel.

"My daughter"—his voice caught on the word, and he had to swallow—"loves rabbits."

The man nodded gravely, without surprise.

"It's Will Sullivan, isn't it." It was not a question, and for a moment Will tensed, warning bells going off.

Reporter.

Just as quickly, he dismissed the thought. The man had none of the scruffiness of a journalist or the camera-ready vacuousness of a television reporter.

The man continued, gently. "I'm sorry to see you here." Will met the dark man's eyes and saw his own pain reflected there, before the other man drew a breath and his gaze became neutral, formal again, like a veil of gauze drawn over a wound.

"Your father was the best governor this state ever had. I expect you'll be better."

Will felt the heat of recognition in his chest at the man's words. Hadn't his whole life been guided by exactly that conviction? *I can be better than my father.*

Automatically his eyes warmed, his campaign smile lit his face. "I appreciate that."

The man's gaze was steady, and Will thought: *He*

knows what bullshit that is. It's all so irrelevant now . . .

The man glanced up at the stained glass of the Christ; the look on his face was ambiguous, rueful.

“There is a way,” he said, his voice low—so low that Will frowned, not sure if he’d heard right.

“I’m sorry?”

But the man merely nodded courteously, almost a bow. “I wish you . . . the best.” He withdrew discreetly, moving out of the chapel with a whisper of doors. Will noted the heaviness about him, the effort with which he moved despite the elegant carriage, and wondered why he had ever thought the man was anything but what Will himself was: a desperate relative, come to bargain with a mythical God for a miracle.

He turned back to look at the glassy Christ. His body sagged, his head dropped to his chest, as he whispered hoarsely:

“Please.”

Chapter 2

It had been like fate, a fairy-tale curse, mythic in its construction. An impossibly beautiful day, glorious, the air crisp with fall and brilliant with sun; trees flaming with color in the Common; dogs and seagulls and squirrels sharing the paths with in-line skaters, lovers, parents with strollers; the whole garden teeming with life.

The crowd that gathered that day in a circular green was hundreds more than Will's campaign staff had even dared to hope. There was a happy, family, American aura to the event: an outdoor band shell with a small stage festooned with red, white, and blue bunting; sweet-faced senior citizens standing behind long tables serving apple cider and Krispy Kreme, clowns handing out helium balloons to jostling children—all a bit of old-time, small-town U.S. of A., framed by a modern city skyline.

Brilliant camera flashes rippled through the crowd; reporters jostled and commented from the sidelines while Senator Flynn, Irish working-class hero, American political institution, longtime blood brother

of Will's father, gave Will a glowing introduction: District Attorney Sullivan, ten years as a prosecutor, four on the city council, fighter for right, defender of the weak, prince of the blood, soon to be king.

By Will's side, always, was the most beautiful woman in the world—darkly lovely, deeply mysterious: his wife, Joanna; and between them, their daughter, Sydney, a sparkling, imperious five-year-old, radiant and basking in the attention, yellow balloon bobbing above her from a ribbon tied around her tiny wrist.

And hovering in the wings, the kingmakers: politicians who had held court in the shadow of Will's father, a powerful if uneasy alliance of Irish political aristocracy and blue-blood patrons from his Brahmin mother's circles, watching Will now with a predatory intensity. Will had known all too well what they were whispering:

The very definition of shoo-in ... the man can go all the way ...

And while he knew he stood there partly because of his name and pedigree, he also knew his name was the gift that would allow him to begin clean and stay clean—to do some good in the world without having to sell his soul for the chance.

Then the applause rose as the senator's voice boomed through the park, and Will jogged out onto the platform—and onto the national stage: “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the next governor of Massachusetts—Will Sullivan.”

At home that night, the applause still rang in Will's ears as the sun went down in fiery glory outside their Tudor mansion in the woods.

He remembered Joanna taking Sydney upstairs, and the backward look she gave him: heart-stopping, full of promise.

And the phone had rung—Jerry, his campaign manager, rhapsodizing about national news coverage and polling points.

And then the moment Will had visualized over and over, that haunted his dreams: Sydney and Joanna singing together in the steamy bathroom, where Joanna bathed Sydney in the claw-foot tub, their faces shining, dewy with sweat. And then Sydney flinching in pain, pulling away from the sponge.

Joanna's surprise, her frown, as her fingers moved tentatively over her daughter's stomach ... the stab of fear as she found the hard, alien mass ...

While downstairs, Will listened to Jerry, knowing that nothing was certain, that the race had just begun, but for a moment allowing himself the dream ...

... and Jerry's words on the phone: "Nothing can stop us now..."

Then Joanna standing in the doorway, holding Sydney, dripping, in a towel.

And Will dropping the phone.

And seeing that his life as he knew it was over, as he looked into the terror in Joanna's eyes.